A CASE OF DOUBLE CONCIOUSNESS: AMERICO-LIBERIANS AND
INDIGENOUS LIBERIAN RELATIONS 1840-1930.

by

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ABSTRACT

This study argues that the formation of Americo-Liberian identity overwhelmingly relied on White American middle class cultural values despite the founders' criticisms and rejection of racial oppression and slavery. Americo-Liberians' previous participation in a culture that downgrades African heritage fostered the internalization of Western notions of civilization and African inferiority that led them to establish an oppressive regime similar to the one they had escaped from, and even enslaved the indigenous population, which they considered "uncivilized." The study thus investigates how formerly oppressed and enslaved blacks became oppressors and enslavers of other black people in the name of a "civilizing mission."

The relationship that developed between Americo-Liberians and indigenous Liberians provides a case study to explore the impact of White supremacy ideology on enslaved Africans and racial uplift ideology. Building on contributions of social theory and conflict theory my analysis of Americo-Liberians demonstrates how social class and ideology interacted to produce socio-economic developments that led to the Liberian Civil War. This study covers the founding of Liberia as a republic during the 1840's through the League of Nation's intervention in 1928. It is during this time period that Americo-Liberians fostered an exploitative and colonizing relationship with the indigenous Liberian population. Previous scholarship regarding Liberia engages in descriptive analysis this study is the first to employ the theoretical framework of double-consciousness to further illuminate the ambivalent positions of the Americo-Liberians vis-à-vis indigenous Liberians

For the entire village that it took to create the person I am today.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1989, a civil war broke out in the West African nation of Liberia, the oldest modern republic in the region. Arguably the longest civil war in the modern history of West Africa-from 1989 to 2005 with only a brief interlude-the war not only devastated the nation, with a death toll exceeding two million people, but it also intensified ethnic tensions that had characterized Liberia's history. The war also probably impacted political stability in the region as Liberia's immediate neighbors, Cote d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone, also became engulfed in protracted civil wars. While the Ivorian and Sierra Leonean civil wars were mostly rooted in postcolonial political dynamics, the Liberian turmoil can be traced directly to the antagonistic relationship that developed between the indigenous population and descendants of American freed enslaved people who established the colony of Liberia. By the end of the 19th century, what is known today as Liberia had been fully formed, with the American expatriates dominating political institutions and controlling the country's economic resources. The settlers, known as Americo-Liberians, marginalized the indigenous population, and reduced them to the status of servitude. The fact that the freed enslaved who opted to return to Africa where they hoped to enjoy complete liberty would oppress other blacks and transform them into virtual enslaved bodies, is one of the ironies of history.

While it is widely acknowledged that the Liberian crisis resulted from the failure of the Americo-Liberians to extend liberty and equality to the indigenous population, historians have not paid adequate attention to the ways American racial oppression experienced by the

expatriates shaped their own relationship with the indigenous population. When the oppressed

become the oppressor, historians need to pay attention to the ways the psychological impact of

oppression affect the type of relationship the victims of oppression establish with a relatively

weaker group. This is the subject of my paper. I investigate how formerly oppressed and

enslaved blacks became oppressors and enslavers of other black people in the name of a

"civilizing mission," but also as part of their own search for a "superior" cultural identity. I argue

that the formation of Americo-Liberian identity in Africa overwhelmingly relied on White

American cultural values and perceptions of race, despite the founders' rejection of racial

oppression and slavery. Having emerged from a culture in America that declared Africans

"uncivilized," and having internalized the belief that "uncivilized" people could be enslaved as

part of the process of civilizing and Christianizing them, the Americo-Liberians established an

oppressive regime similar to the one they had escaped from in America, and proceeded to treat

the indigenous population as enslaved people on the pretext that they were not "civilized."

To explain this historical paradox, I employ the concept of double-consciousness to

illuminate the ambivalent positions of the Americo-Liberians vis-à-vis the indigenes, and how

this double consciousness shaped the relationship between these two groups of Africans and laid

the foundation for the Liberian civil war. Using a combination of primary and secondary sources,

my ultimate objective is to explore the historical roots of the Liberian crises in order to offer a

fresh understanding of the crisis. The central primary sources from which this argument grew

include the various editions of the *Liberian Bulletin* which the American Colonization Society

published during the early half of the twentieth century and now form part of the Carol Mundy

Special Collections at the University of Central Florida. Furthermore, the Liberian Letters from the University of Virginia were utilized for this analysis.

The concept of double consciousness serves as my analytical tool. This thesis is the first to discuss the phenomenon's cause through the theoretical framework of double consciousness as described by W.E.B. Dubois in the The Souls of Black Folk. More specifically this study examines how double consciousness among Americo-Liberians elites affected relations with indigenous Liberians.

In The Souls of Black Folk, Du Bois describes this mental conflict as double consciousness; an internal battle for identity that involves thinking about oneself through two perspectives: one belonging to your racial group and the second based on the narrative White supremacy constructs. Often double consciousness leads to hypocritical behavior that is based on other's negative image of one's race. The Liberian experience illuminates the effects of double consciousness on Black life. Upon their arrival Americo-Liberians created a settler society marked by the same oppressive characteristics of White supremacy in the United States of America. Thus, while enjoying their liberation, they turned around to oppress the indigenous population. This thesis starts with the establishment and settlers of Liberia. Throughout the thesis double consciousness and its effects among Americo-Liberians will be examined through concepts of Black Nationalism, Black elitism and Black colonialism.

CHAPTER ONE: LIBERIAN FOUNDATIONS

American Colonization Society

Liberia was founded by the American Colonization Society (ACS) in 1822 to settle emancipated black enslaved bodies. The early 19th century saw the rise of many benevolent societies dedicated to improving religious behavior and social conditions. These included the ACS, the American Tract Society and the American Society for Meliorating the Condition of Jews.[1] The ACS was formed in 1816 as a northern Christian and humanitarian organization with the main objective of returning freed enslaved blacks to Africa. Many members of the clergy occupied important positions within the ACS, and dedicated their lives to its mission.

In the interest of scholarship, the American Colonization Society must be placed in the context of place and time. Prior to 1865 the simultaneous development of egalitarian principles and chattel slavery formed the most important contradiction in American society.[2] After the American Revolution, Northern states passed emancipation laws that ignited a substantial increase of the free black population. From 1790 to 1820 the free African American population rose by 288 percent.[3] During this historic period the presence of a freed black population epitomized American social contradictions. Many of these emancipated blacks championed a new vision of "liberty" that was not fully articulated in the United States's Constitution or embraced by most American political elites, which demonstrated that liberty and blackness were

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[1] Allan Yarema, The American Colonization Society: An Avenue to Freedom, (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2006), 10.

[2] Tom W. Shick, *Behold the Promiseland: A History of Afro-American Settler Society in Nineteenth-Century Liberia*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 3.

[3] Claude A. Clegg III, *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and The Making of Liberia*, (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 19.

not mutually exclusive.[4] Among southern slaveholders the fear of enslaved revolts made the free

black population a threat to the institution of slavery both politically and economically. The

prevailing perception among slaveholders was that the presence of free blacks encouraged

widespread unrest by inspiring the enslaved to pursue their own freedom.

This perception became so profound that the idea of creating a colony in Africa to

repatriate the freed enslaved population gained popularity. Colonization seemed to provide a

moral solution to the dilemma of black bondage amidst white freedom. For most slaveholders

and their allies removing freed black Americans from the United States ensured a more stable

and homogenous society in the United States. In 1782 Thomas Jefferson stated:

> Among the Romans emancipation required but one effort. The slave when free, might
> mix, without staining the blood of his master. But with us a second step is necessary,
> unknown to history. When freed, he is to be removed beyond the reach of mixture.[5]

With this remark, Jefferson suggested that the United States directly plant a colony for free

blacks in Africa.

Expatriation provided a morally just solution to the racial situation. For the ACS,

colonization provided a mutually beneficial situation in which the United States removed the

threat and stain of slavery from its history, while Africa received the opportunity to be civilized

by the repatriated blacks.[6] Establishing a colony provided a refuge for freed black Americans

who desired repatriation to their ancestral lands. Nonetheless, the idea of repatriating blacks to

Africa was not universally embraced. Some saw it as an act of sheer racism, one that would

enable slaveholders to perpetuate their practices without opposition from freed blacks. This

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[5] Thomas Jefferson, Notes on The State of Virginia, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1955), 139.
[6] Gus J. Liebenow, *Liberia: The Evolution of Privilege,* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), 1.

segment of the America population, especially those in the North, believed that emancipation would require the inspiration and political pressure of freed blacks; to remove this group from the land sabotaged the struggle to end slavery in America. Thus the ACS practiced caution when establishing its guiding philosophies. In its constitution the ACS omitted mention of slavery and clearly outlined that only free blacks were to be the object of its operations.[7]

Eventually, slave owners came to dominate the American Colonization Society, providing most of its financial support. Supporters included General Andrew Jackson, Speaker of the House Henry Clay and President James Monroe. The Slave Trade Act of 1819 strengthened the ACS's political position. Under the slave trade act the U.S. congress appropriated 100,000 dollars for the support of blacks recaptured from enslaved trading ships.[8] With the Federal Government's support The American Colonization Society became the main government agent responsible for handling and resettling those captured from illegal slave trading. Additionally, the ACS's purpose was to "consider the expediency of ameliorating the condition of the free people of color in America by providing a colonial retreat…in Africa."[9] Through successful lobbying ACS received grants for land, homes, equipment and teachers from the American federal government. The ACS received support from many eager southern slaveholders. Under the façade of humanist ideals slaveholders supported ACS intending to rid themselves of undesirable groups: free blacks and unproductive enslaved people. Thus some of the United States' wealthiest slaveholders sent hundreds of previously enslaved people to Liberia.[10]

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[7] Yekutiel Gershoni. *Black Colonialism: The Americo-Liberian Scramble for the Hinterland*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985), 9.
[8] Gershoni, 8.
[9] Shick, 6.
[10] Clegg, 5.

Paternalistic sentiments among slaveholders depicted colonization as a reward for an enslaved person's supposed faithful service.

The American Colonization Society's efforts became fruitful in 1822 with the establishment of a permanent settlement in West Africa of Cape Mesurado. Eventually this settlement would be known as Liberia. Admittedly, colonization affected a small portion of freed slaves and mulattoes. Nonetheless, it is believed that between 1822 and 1867 an estimated twenty thousand freed blacks emigrated to Liberia.[11] Eventually, the early black settlers monopolized political power and economic resources in Liberia, but from 1820 to 1847 the American Colonization controlled every aspect of settler life. According to the ACS the emigrants were incapable of self-sustainment and self-government. The constitution of 1820 gave the ACS all political and judicial power. Thus emigrants were not entitled to free suffrage, make laws or elect their own leaders.

The noninterventionist policy of United States toward Liberia signified that settlers were subject to the "unconstrained political authority of a paternalistic association of southern slave owners."[12] The authoritarian institutions that the American Colonization Society established shaped the culture of early Liberian society and continued to affect the political landscape in Liberia beyond the ACS's presence. Essentially, the American Colonization Society established a permanent negative precedent for the Americo-Liberian elite's oppressive rule over the indigenous population. The exact nature of Americo-Liberian elite's oppressive rule will be further discussed later on.

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[11] Gus, 47.
[12] Jeremy I. Levitt. *The Evolution of Deadly Conflict in Liberia: From Paternalism to State Collapse*, (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2005), 36.

In Liberia the American Colonization Society embarked in an economic enterprise without expecting financial gain, it sought to create an economically self- efficient settlement. Agriculture was initially endorsed due to racial stereotypes among the ACS agents. According to these common stereotypes Afro-Americans were unsuited for occupations other than tilling the soil. Despite the ACS's efforts, commerce formed the predominant economic sector.

Often the American Colonization Society utilized religious undertones to justify the emigration of free black Americans. Consequently, the colony provided the ACS and its Christian black settlers with the opportunity to seek the conversion of "wide regions of Africa from barbarism, heathenism, cruelty, and desolation into a garden of civilization and to make it a prominent portion of Christendom."[13] Essentially, the ACS envisioned black immigrants emulating American cultural and social structures that would supposedly instruct Africans in the art of civilization and the gospel.

The burden of spreading the gospel and promoting Western civilization rested on the black immigrants. Black immigrants would assume this responsibility aggressively, seeking not only to "convert" and "civilize," but to also overcome their own psychological feelings of racial and class inferiority inherited from their experience as former slaves. The desire to feel superior in relation to other blacks, deemed heathens and barbarians, formed the philosophical foundations of the objectives of the settler community in its relationship with the indigenous population they encountered

Both economic and ideological enterprises brought the ACS and the settlers in direct conflict with the indigenous Liberian population. Often the ACS's and settlers' ambition to

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[13] Gershoni,9.

establish agricultural settlements was thwarted by the indigenous population's unwillingness to

sell land. Furthermore, indigenous Liberians considered settlers to be trade competitors. The first

deadly conflict between the settlers and the indigenous Liberians, the Dei-Settler War of 1822,

resulted from the violent means through which the ACS acquired land for Cape Mesurado from

the Dei. This conflict marked the beginning of a long history of negative relations between

Americo-Liberian settlers and indigenous Liberians. The ACS's reign would be witness to four

more conflicts between settlers and indigenous Liberians. There is extensive scholarship

regarding these early conflicts thus this examination will not delve into the conflicts beyond

listing them below in Table 1:1.

Figure 1

Conflicts between Americo-Liberian settlers and indigenous Liberians prior to 1847.
Dei- Settler War of 1822
Dei-Gola-Settler War of 1832
Bassa-Settler War of 1835
Kru-Settler "Fishmen" Conflict of 1838
Vai-Settler Battles of 1839-1840

Liberia

Located in the West African Forest Zone, modern Liberia is bordered by Sierra Leone to the west and Cote d'Ivoire to the east. Within the Liberian territory reside three major ethnic groups: the Kru, Mande and Mel. These ethnic groups are also found in neighboring countries, and they practiced indigenous African religions or Islam. There were also secret societies called Poros and Sandes that served important roles in maintaining social norms and traditions.[14] Additionally, land is typically held communally. Ruling power rests within village chiefs, although the political systems were relatively weak. During the pre-colonial period, ethnic groups lacked strong political systems. Occasionally ethnic groups maintained loose political alliances that enabled the maintenance of political coexistence.[15]

Prior to the arrival of American expatriates, the Liberian territory had limited importance in commercial activities. The region lacked trading goods that Europeans sought such as ivory and gold. Moreover, even large slave trading stations that were common in the region, were not established by European slave traders, which suggest further that the region was not considered an essential part of the European trading networks in the region. The trading activities Europeans engaged in, were transferred to coastal Sierra Leone and Guinea. The absence of major European interest enabled American expatriates to establish themselves with little opposition from European merchants. Additionally, the relatively weaker political systems in the region made it

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[14] M.B. Akpan. "Black Imperialism: Americo-Liberian Rule over the African Peoples of Liberia, 1841-1864," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 7, no. 2 (1973): 224.
[15]Gershoni, 5.

easier for the settlers to expand their political influences from the coast to the interior despite their small population.

Black settlers in Liberia came from three distinct backgrounds. The leaders of the American Colonization Society elected blacks that agreed to live according to the Christian values, norms and rules of the organization. Considering the large influence of slave owners in ACS, most immigrants were emancipated blacks. After the establishment of Liberia, the terms of emancipation from many slave owners stipulated that black Americans immigrate to Liberia. These emancipated enslaved blacks were considered more docile than those who obtained their freedom without the American Colonization Society's assistance. This group generally lacked professional skills and literacy.

The second largest group of immigrants consisted of free Black Americans who immigrated to Liberia voluntarily. Most members of this group of free black Americans were literate and came from the larger cities of the eastern United States. This group also comprised the largest number of individuals with technical and administrative skills. Not surprisingly, this free group eventually monopolized political and economic power within Liberia. The free Black community would produce Liberia's most commercially and politically successful families such as the Johnsons.[16] Collectively, emancipated and free black Americans came to be known as Americo-Liberians.

Following the Slave Trade Act of 1819 Liberia experienced an influx of recaptured enslaved people from ships engaged in illegal slave trade. The United States Navy sent to Liberia

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[16] Shick, 46.

two hundred eight-seven recaptured Africans between 1820 and 1843.[17] American immigrants

donned recaptured Africans with the name Congoes. During the early settlement period Congoes

were under the jurisdiction of the agents of the United States, not the American Colonization

Society.[18] The dislocated population of Congoes created alliances with the ruling Americo-

Liberian class in order to improve their social position. Throughout Liberian history Congoes

served as a buffer population between Americo-Liberians and indigenous Liberians.

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[17]Ibid, 66.
[18] Levitt, 39.

CHAPTER TWO: BLACK NATIONALISM & RACIAL UPLIFT

American to Americo-Liberian

For the settlers in the colony of Liberia, emigration to Africa seemed to be an acceptable solution to the racial prejudice that impeded their entry into American society on equal terms. Regardless of their status in America, the black population experienced limited liberty in a society that upheld strict divisions between whiteness and blackness, in ways that made cross-racial assimilation essentially impossible. In the ideology of white supremacy whiteness was associated with superiority and civilization while blackness was connotative of inferiority. White supremacy ideology seemed so pervasive and resilient that for many blacks, their physical departure from such a racist society proved crucial for liberty.[19] Liberia therefore became a haven for those seeking dignity and freedom. The name "Liberia," means "the land of liberty." Motivated by a yearning for freedom, Liberians adopted the motto "the love of liberty brought us here."[20]

For the thousands of black people that immigrated to Africa's west coast, Liberia symbolized redemption, and from that early experience, the idea of Black Nationalism began to evolve. Although there are different strands, Black Nationalism is the effort of black people to create a sovereign nation-state with sufficient military and economic power to defend it. Black

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[19] Clegg, 21.
[20] Gus, 18.

Nationalism manifests a desire for independence and the determination of black people to demonstrate their ability for self-government.[21] Black nationalism originated in the 1700s, but reached its peak between 1850 and 1925 with prominent figures such as Marcus Garvey, Martin Delany, and Liberia's own Edward Wilmot Blyden. In the nineteenth century repartitioning the American enslaved to Liberia was a common theme in Black Nationalism. Edward Wilmot Blyden arrived in Liberia in 1850 believing he could use his talents. Soon Blyden became deeply involved in the development of Liberia.

Edward Blyden noted, "The first settlers in Liberia were men imbued with the racial spirit."[22] Empowered by evolving Black Nationalist ideals, black Americans in Liberia articulated a new vision of black unity in historical, cultural and biological terms. The African continent connoted a pristine ancestral homeland for those embroidered with romantic imaginings. Thus Liberia and indeed, Africa was considered the natural home of black people.[23] Returning to the motherland would enable these freed black Americans to openly celebrate the vibrancy of their African culture and people. It must be noted that the embrace of African culture contained limits, which will be expanded later on.

The ACS's basic foundation and objectives were re-articulated by the educated elites among the settlers to include a new vision. Liberian settlers considered it their duty to prepare an independent black state in Africa for their racial brethren within the continent and those who would later arrive from the Americas. An Americo-Liberian settler expressed this common sentiment by stating "I feel very proud that myself and family may be an example for those that

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[21] Jeremiah Wilson Moses. *Classical Black Nationalism: From the American Revolution to Marcus Garvey*, (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 2.

[22] Edward W. Blyden "The Future of Liberia." *Liberia Recorder* (Monrovia, Liberia), February 3, 1906.

[23] Clegg, 257.

may hereafter come to this country of industry."[24] Many settlers believed that collective empowerment could only be achieved when the African race demonstrated self-determination in managing its own affairs.

By the 1840s, this group had become sufficiently strong to demand independence from the ACS. On July 23, 1847, they declared the colony independent. Americo-Liberians assumed the duties of running an independent nation. One settler symbolized this predominate sentiment among settlers when he stated " Today I am a free man, responsible for my country and to my God for what I do with my freedom."[25] Liberty on the African soil marked the beginning of Liberia, and the founders make it clear that the land will belong only to people of African descent. The Liberian constitution of 1847 explicitly states "none but Negroes or persons of Negro descent shall be eligible to citizenship in this Republic."[26]

Double Consciousness

Despite the founder's original intentions, the rhetoric of mutuality soon disintegrated into the reality of contradiction. The proclamation of equality and Negro citizenship had its limits. The Americo-Liberian mission did not constitute a complete departure from the White supremacy it denounced nor did it constitute a program of transformative action for the oppressed Black population. Americo-Liberians sought to control rather than change the system

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[24] William Douglass. 29 January, 1857. Letter to a Friend [probably Dr. James Minor]. The Liberian Letters. University of Virginia, Charlottesville.
[25] The American Colonization Society. "Address on Liberia ." *Liberia* 28 (1906): 42.
[26] The Liberian constitution , article 4 :section 13.

of oppression. Distinctions of class, color, and education that were a legacy of the American experience were exacerbated in Liberia.[27]

From the very beginning Americo-Liberians established a system of authoritarianism and inequality characterized by a four-tier system of citizenship. Americo-Liberian settlers enjoyed full citizenship under the newly constitution. Within this group the commercial, coastal, and political elite comprised the first class, and the small farmers the second.[28] Recaptive Africans acquired a form of quasi-citizenship in which they remained under the authority of the resident U.S. Government Agent for Recaptives and subject to the laws of Liberia. These recaptive Africans constitute the third tier in the system of citizenship. The fourth tier consisted of indigenous Liberians who were generally not entitled to citizenship.

Americo-Liberians collectively engaged in contradictory social behavior that is categorically double consciousness. Double consciousness is a useful theoretical framework for understanding psychosocial divisions within societies marked by cultural and racial stratification. This thesis will turn its attention to the discussion of double consciousness as it relates to the experiences of Americo-Liberians.

Since the early twentieth century scholars Frantz Fanon and W.E.B Du Bois explored the power of White ideology on black life and thought beyond the confines of physical slavery. Both scholars argued that at some point in the black experience the black subject realizes that between them and the dominant white world there exists a barrier.[29] Most importantly, the black subject

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[27] Marie Tyler-McGraw. *An African Republic: Black & White Virginians in the Making of Liberia*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 152.

[28] Jeremy I. Levitt. *The Evolution of Deadly Conflict in Liberia: From Paternalism to State Collapse*, (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2005), 91.

[29] W.E.B. Du Bois. *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Library, 1996), 5.

becomes aware of their otherness in relation to the dominant white society. Describing his own experience Du Bois states:

> Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil.[30]

This otherness or blackness is portrayed as inferior, hypersexual and excessively violent by the dominant white society. Furthermore, the racist societies inflict mental traumas on the oppressed non-white masses. The mental trauma is embodied in the formation of a divided self-perception within black bodies. Du Bois calls this divided self-perception as double consciousness. In <u>The Souls of Black Folk</u>, Du Bois defines double consciousness as:

> One feels his two-ness-an American, a Negro; two souls, two un reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[31]

Double consciousness is a battle for identity that occurs on an individual and collective level. According to Fanon's and Du Bois's argument, black bodies are constantly negotiating their identities: adopting and shedding identities throughout their entire lifetimes. They are incessantly attempting to "merge their double self into a better and truer self."[32] Those with dual identity, such as the free blacks who settled in Liberia, often deal with mental conflicts rooted in past experiences of rejection and oppression. Often this struggle to form one's true identity by negotiating various conflicting identities, leads to a rebellious tendency or contradictory behavior.[33]

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[30] Ibid, 5.
[31] Ibid, 5.
[32] Ibid, 5.
[33] Lawrie Balfour. "A Most Disagreeable Mirror: Race Consciousness as Double Consciousness," *Political Theory* 26, no. 3 (1998): 349.

Paradoxically, Americo-Liberians attempted to construct an identity and escape their otherness by supporting the very rules that defined them into the existence of other. Americo-Liberians judged their ethnicity, through the revelation of the dominant culture, white American supremacy. During their time as black American enslaved bodies, Americo-Liberians were subject to a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's worth by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."[34]. Their experience with white supremacist ideology engendered an inferiority complex. This inferiority complex reflects a form of internalized oppression. Internalized oppression involves a victim's subjection to the very racist ideologies that define them and imprison them.[35] Americo-Liberians became influenced by the negative image that White supremacist ideology promotes regarding their own Black race and otherness Manifestations of internalized oppression among Americo-Liberians included feelings of self-doubt, disgust and disrespect for indigenous Liberians.[36]

The Americo-Liberian experience epitomizes the dangerous effects of internalized oppression on behavior. Americo-Liberians became psychologically detached from their African heritage and adopted the culture of the dominant society in attempt to gain acceptance.[37] According to the sociologist Moore, the oppressed develop maladaptive responses in an attempt to maintain mental sanity. These maladaptive responses take the form of efforts to change their reality and take on the "civilized" characteristics of their oppressors.[38] Fanon goes further than Du Bois to suggest that this behavior is more evident among upwardly mobile Black bodies, such

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[34] Ibid, 5.
[35] Karen D. Pykes. " What is Internalized Racial Oppression and Why Don't We Study It? Acknowledging Racism's Hidden Injuries," *Sociological Perspectives* 53, no. 4 (2010): 553.
[36] Ibid, 553.
[37] T. Owens Moore. "A Fanonian Perspective on Double Consciousness," *Journal of Black Studies* 35, no. 6 (2005): 759.
[38] Frantz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*, (New York: Grove Press, 2008), some.

as the Liberian elite. While trying to resist racist stereotypes about otherness the oppressed simultaneously assimilate White supremacy and the glorification of whiteness (western civilization).[39]

Wages of Whiteness

Throughout his life Du Bois engaged the questions of race and racial domination, developing various social theories. Collectively these theories are called Du Boisian theory. To a certain extent this thesis relies on various elements of Du Boisian theory, among them the problem of the Color Line and the wages of whiteness. In 1906 Du Bois stated:

> "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the Color Line-the question of the relation of the advanced races of men who happened to be white to the great majority of the underdeveloped or half-developed nations of mankind who happen to be yellow, brown or black."[40]

Du Bois argued that this relationship is characterized by a white cultural, political, and economic exploitation that narrows the opportunities for development among the people of color. According to Du Bois "the white races have had the hegemony of civilization-so far so that "white" and "civilized: have become synonymous in every-day speech."[41]

White supremacy like all ideologies reflects class interests and class-consciousness, particularly in the context of imperialism and colonialism. As social construction whiteness emerged to justify a structure organized around exploitation. In societies dominated by White

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[39] Pykes, 558.

[40] W.E.B. Du Bois. "The Color Line Belts the World." In W.E.B. Du Bois: a reader, 42-43. New York: H. Holt and Co., 1995.

[41] Ibid, 42.

hegemony the wages of whiteness conferred tangible economic and political benefits. Whiteness was the utmost marker of personhood and privilege to exercise power. Du Bois notes the wages of whiteness in his pivotal analysis of American society during the late nineteenth century, <u>Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880</u>. Under the system of American White Supremacy white members of the lower class were compensated by the public and psychological wages of whiteness.[42] Thus subscribing to whiteness provided possibilities to ascend into a higher social status and bourgeoisie class.[43] The period that Du Bois analyzes in <u>Black Reconstruction</u> is not far removed from the first departure of Americo-Liberians from the United States to Liberian shores. Thus it is very likely that Americo-Liberians were aware of the wages of whiteness from their past as black Americans. Engaging in the wages of whiteness provided Americo-Liberians a paradigm with which to construct their superior identity.

In the nineteenth century imperialism and colonialism was in part the making of bourgeoisie Europe, with its contradictions as well as organizational and ideological accomplishments. The European bourgeoisie aspired to be a universal class while marking its cultural distinctiveness. The cultural alienation of elites from the average African is not peculiar to Liberia. Dr. Cedric Robinson effectively notes the following:

> As a class, their historical interests were identical to those of other 'middling'
> classes formed from professional service and intellectual and ideological
> functions…the black intelligentsias of the United States, the Caribbean and
> Africa-were captives of a dialectic; on the one hand, their continued
> development was structurally implicated in the continued domination of their
> societies by Atlantic metro poles; on the other, the historical destiny of their class
> was linked to nationalism. Put directly, the future of the Black middle class was

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[42] W.E.B. Du Bois and David L. Lewis. *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880,* (New York: Free Press, 1998), 700.
[43] Cheryl I. Harris. "Whiteness as Property" *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1992): 83.

embedded in the contradictions of imperialism.[44]

During the late nineteenth century black elites in the United States embraced White culture, creating exclusiveness and social distance between themselves and the uneducated black masses they considered inferior. Like their Americo-Liberian counterpart, black elites in the United States believed it was their responsibility to improve the race based on the bourgeois ideologies of social purity, self-help and the accumulation of wealth. Possibly, many of the free blacks that arrived among the early Americo-Liberian settlers were already part of or familiar with these black elites and their engagement with whiteness as a paradigm for forming an identity of superiority. It is also an African phenomenon, reflected in the compliance of African elites with values and institutions of the colonizers.

The Impact on Culture[45]

An individual's identity exists in the framework of culture. Historically, Black Americans were predominately exposed to a Eurocentric perspective of world events.[46] The unequal power relationship between slaves and non-slaves affected the cultural transfer in such a way that the exchange could not have been fair. Through violence and disfranchisement the institution of slavery constituted an organized repression of the cultural life of slaves. In "Soul Murder and Slavery," Nell Painter describes this process as soul murder.

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[44] Robinson, 40.

[45] The internal contradictions associated with racial uplift movements bring into question the value of culture as a factor of resistance. This topic will be expanded on in a future thesis.

[46] Shick, 11.

American Black bodies lost a large portion of their indigenous cultural originality and became more susceptible to the dominant Western culture. By 1830 there was a discernable African American identity in the United States that represented the demise of an African sociocultural matrix.[47] Emancipated slaves arrived to Liberia having already imbibed in the United States an ideology of Western superiority. After being excluded from the mainstream American society, as supposedly not being American, Americo-Liberians actively attempted to demonstrate their Americanism. It is for this reason that they relied so heavily on White American culture when constructing their new identities and social institutions in Liberia.

More practically, American society constituted a major point of reference for all activities. Part of the problem can be traced to the fact that, most blacks in America were born in the country. According to the records native-born Blacks comprised the largest portion of the American enslaved population during the late eighteenth century. Inclusively "all but one percent of American enslaved bodies were native-born and most of them were…fourth or fifth generation American."[48] Unlike their Caribbean counterparts Black Americans lacked a constant influx of enslaved bodies directly from Africa, thus lacking a direct and constant source of African culture.

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[47] Michael A. Gomez. *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998): 5.
[48] Shick, 11.

CHAPTER THREE: BLACK ELITES

Recreating the United States

In their new environment Americo- Liberians created communities based on their American cultural baggage. The Americo-Liberian's strong identification with White Western civilization made them compliant with its ruling values and structural arrangements, which they considered superior to African civilization. Americo-Liberians were essentially American rather than African in orientation. In their efforts to preserve the pillars of Western civilization Americo-Liberians emulated American architecture, diets, clothing, language, political ethos, and spiritual values.[49] When re accounting his visit to Monrovia to the American Colonization Society, an Americo-Liberian remarked, " I spend a few days at Monrovia in December and I tell you they do things like you white folks."[50]

These remnants of their American origin and identity were important to the formation of Americo-Liberian identity. Americo-Liberians sought to refute the rhetoric of Black inferiority by incorporating the race into ideological categories of Western progress and civilization.[51] Following Aristotelian notions of civilization Americo-Liberians emphasized external behaviors as markers of superiority. Racial uplift entailed self-help, temperance, social purity and the accumulation of wealth. Class differentiation and the existence of a petite bourgeoisie became evidence of race progress. The active embodiment of Western civilization indicated social status.

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[49] Clegg, 97.

[50] William Douglass. 26 January 1859 Letter to Dr. James H. Minor. The Liberian Letters. University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

[51] Kevin Kelly Gaines. *Uplifting the Race: Black leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996): xiv.

Thus Christian character and "civilized" nature became social and political commodities.[52] These included eating habits, housing, religious ceremonies and dress. Americo-Liberians utilized Western modes of dress despite their incompatibility to Liberia's tropical weather. American foods like bacon were preferred over African food staples like yams and plantains.[53] Most of all Americo-Liberians characterized themselves as English speaking Christians.

Differentiation and Segregation

Among various groups subordinates engage in defensive othering in order to distance themselves from fellow subordinates. Collectively, Americo-Liberians created an intra-ethnic other by constructing derogatory sub-ethnic identities.[54] Intra-group othering enabled Americo-Liberians to rise above the negative stereotypes that the dominant society ascribed to their ethnic group. Additionally, it enabled them to demonstrate their belongingness within Western civilization because they shared the same attitudes towards the co-ethnics who fit with the stereotypes.[55]

Defensive othering relied heavily on terminology. Initially the term Liberian was utilized to describe those who had emigrated from the United States. In order to differentiate themselves from the vast African majority, settlers modified their label to include Americo.[56] Terminology

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[52] Clegg, 261.
[53] Akpan, 219.
[54] Pykes, 558.
[55] Pykes, 552.
[56] Clegg 97.

served to mark the indigenous Liberian population as inferior. The indigenous Liberian population was derided as uncivilized, barbarian and heathen. Some Americo-Liberians became "more consciously and chauvinistically American, at least in their self-conceptions as they interacted with non western people."[57] Reared up in Western culture, Americo Liberians believed their cultural orientation to be superior. African culture was constantly ridiculed.

Americo- Liberians' elitist rhetoric held that cultural superiority determined who ruled. Lower status resulted from cultural differences, lack of a bourgeoisie definition of morality, rather than biological notions of racial inferiority. Apart from the influence of double consciousness it must be recognized that this elitist ideology intends to maintain a bourgeois de facto domination of capitalist society. In essence economic interests to control the means of production must not be negated as a contributing factor to the relationship Americo-Liberians fostered with the indigenous Liberian population. Americo-Liberians maintained exclusionary boundaries. The emancipated enslaved blacks actively segregated themselves from the indigenous population they believed to be inferior. Although they were people of African descent, Americo-Liberians were foreigners, accorded a kind of honorary white status that enabled them access to economic and political powers.

Americo-Liberians formed a system of stratification based on color politics. The possession of lighter skin was associated with greater civilization and intelligence. During the early years of the republic mulattos monopolized politics and commerce on the basis of skin color.[58] Light-skinned free blacks dominated national affairs and darker skinned ex-enslaved people occupied the middle class. The indigenous Liberian population was relegated to an

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[57] Clegg 97
[58] Mgbeoji, 7.

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inferior class as "heathens" and "uncivilized."[59] Edward Wilmot Blyden, who immigrated to

Liberia in 1855, left the ruling Republican Party in 1867 attributing it to the presence of "mulatto

oppression."[60] Blyden regarded the Americo-Liberian elite as pompous mulattos who emulated

the worst of their white fathers. In reality the gap between groups was slim: most Americo-

Liberians were poor, ignorant and uneducated.

Masonic lodges

Prior to the 1980 coup, a select group of Americo-Liberian families monopolized all

prominent political, economic and social positions. These families consolidated relationships

within their class through churches and fraternal orders. Organizations assisted class formation

by institutionalizing social differences. The existence of class-consciousness is demonstrated in

the desire to join associations and clubs intended to enhance social status. The organizations

provided a direct means of transmitting social values such as charity and Christian propriety. In

Liberia the Masonic Lodge sustained the political and cultural hegemony of the Americo-

Liberian elite.

Founded in 1867, the Masonic Order of Liberia was based on principles of freemasonry.

Since blacks were not eligible for admission into American Masonic orders it is probable that

American-Liberians gained knowledge of Freemasonry through covert means. The Masonic

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[59] Eric Burin. *Slavery and The Peculiar Solution*, (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2005), 141.
[60] Mgbeoji, 7.

Lodges that emerged controlled Liberian economics and politics. The most important Masonic Lodge, located in Monrovia, is called the Grand Lodge.

Membership in the Masonic Lodge was a prerequisite for ascendancy in the True Whig Party, the monolithic political machinery of Liberia.[61] Prior to the Civil War, most important leaders of the True Whig Party were Masons and held high office in the Grand Lodge. Members of the Masonic Lodge constituted the patricians who dominated the Liberian state. It must be noted that the Masonic Lodge excluded indigenous Liberians from joining. The interests of the Masonic Lodge were synonymous with that of the True Whig Party and in turn, the state. The secrecy of the Masonic Lodge provided Americo-Liberian elites with a safe forum to discuss differences of opinion. It is largely believed that matters of state were decided within the Masonic Lodges.[62]

Church and State

Religion is the organization of spirituality into something that became the handmaiden of conquerors. Nearly all religions were brought to people and imposed on people by conquerors, and used as the framework to control their minds.

John Henrik Clarke

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[61] Ikechi Mgbeoji. Collective Insecurity: The Liberian Crisis, Unilateralism, and Global Order (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003): 9.
[62] Schick, 57.

Christianity was one element of civilized culture that settlers strived to collectively preserve in order to assert their bourgeoisie morality. Evangelical principles reinforced obedience and submission in civil society. Most Americo-Liberians received education through religious institutions. This can be attributed to the lack of government funds to establish schools and the American Colonization Society's legacy in creating missionary schools. The church held a central role in the lives of most Americo-Liberians. An early Americo-Liberian settler, William Douglas, relates his daily routine as "we have the worship of God regularly twice a day, we also have a school which we attend daily and at night."[63]

Religious affiliations fulfilled important roles in nurturing a sense of community among black American settlers.[64] Often the first building to be constructed within a new settlement was the church. In a letter to Reverend W. Slaughter William Douglas details his role in constructing the settlement's first church and the church's significance to the community at large. Douglas writes:

> After our arrival in this place we have put up a neat little log church of which we call Union Church, as every persons who lived in this little settlement are trying to be one people for the cause of Jesus Christ our Lord…I hope we try to do what we can if the good Lord's permits to build up our county.[65]

In Liberian political affairs the separation of church and state remained nonexistent. Liberian political etiquette required officials to attend church and preach. Becoming influential

[63] William Douglass 8 March, 1857. Letter to Dr. James H. Minor and Frank Nelson. The Liberian Letters. University of Virginia, Charlottesville.
[64] Shick, 53.
[65] William Douglass. 24 April 1857 Letter to Reverend W. Slaughter. The Liberian Letters. University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

in church provided a springboard for political advancement.[66] Thus the clergy of most churches remained under the White party. In order to maintain a decent standard of living clergy divided their time between their congregations and government jobs. Inclusively, President William V.S. Tubman was a Methodist clergyman.

Various Christian missions, including Baptists, Episcopalians and Congregationalists established stations in Liberia. The Liberian Methodist Church is the dominant Christian denomination in Liberia. The Republic of Liberia co-opted the church in its goals of colonization and domination.[67] Seeing themselves in a position of superiority, Americo-Liberians considered it their duty to regenerate the entire African continent. Americo-Liberians had utopian visions of the society they hoped to establish. The purpose of Liberia's founding involved the civilization and Christianization of Africa. Americo-Liberians justified their previous enslavement in the United States, claiming that despite its grim nature, slavery posed a disguised blessing for those enslaved.[68] Under this paternalistic rhetoric, slavery placed some of Africa's children in circumstances that prepared them to spread Christianity and civilization among their African kin.

Along with the rhetoric of early Black Nationalism, Americo-Liberians believed God invariably directed their civilizing movement.[69] For one Americo-Liberian "the work of education, civilization, and Christianity in Liberia generally is on the upward trend, and the signs of the times are that God is in the front, leading us step by step onward and upward."[70] Thus Americo-Liberians considered it their manifest destiny to reform the indigenous Liberian population of the hinterland.

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[66] Gus, 96.
[67] Ayodeji Olukoju. *Culture and Customs of Liberia*,(Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 37.
[68] Shick, 9.
[69] Moses, 3.
[70] W.F. Hawkins. "Letters from Liberia." *Liberia* 19 (1901): 22.

CHAPTER FOUR: BLACK COLONIALISM

Civilized Settlements

Liberia's natural growth required expansion into the interior. Government policy emphasized the cultural and political assimilation of indigenous Liberians into Americo-Liberian society. Americo-Liberians assumed the role of emissaries of Western civilization and destroyers of Africans' "barbarous" religious customs.[71] To integrate indigenous peoples, Americo-Liberians established a network of "civilized" settlements. These civilized settlements held the status of townships while the indigenous Liberian villages held no municipal standing.[72] Out of all the settlements, Monrovia formed the cultural center of Liberia. Monrovia attracted most of occupational elite. New settlers were attracted to Monrovia's fine looking houses and fashionable residents. A visitor described Monrovia as "nearly as large as Charlottesville and has some fine houses in it. The people here are very genteel."[73] In the midst of apparent affluence most settlers lived a peripheral existence.

According to their rhetoric, large Americo-Liberian settlements among the indigenous populations would effectively diffuse Western Civilization and Christianity amongst indigenous Liberians. Government policies stipulated official guidelines for integrating indigenous Liberians into the settler communities. Americo-Liberians sought social control by defining citizenship as a bourgeois privilege that had to be earned. One act required that all indigenous Liberians wear Western clothing within settlement boundaries.[74] Americo-Liberians sought to assimilate

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[71] Clegg 63.
[72] Gershoni,16.
[73] Mary Michie. 4 February, 1857. Letter to Dr. James H. Minor. The Liberian Letters. University of Virginia, Charlottesville.
[74] Shick, 64.

indigenous Liberians through two principal means: providing formal education and apprenticeship opportunities for young indigenous Liberians. Under these two systems African youths were to acquire a western education, western political values, and loyalty to the Monrovia government.[75] Occasionally, indigenous youth who received western training became part of the missionary education system. In a letter to Dr. James H. Minor of the American Colonization Society, William Douglass describes a converted indigenous man who conducted his Sabbath school.

> We have meetings in the week on the Sabbath and also Sabbath school; and in the week day school is for us, which is taught by Mr. John A. Claode a native of this country who have been reared up by the good missionary society some years back. Who ever thought we would find such a one as this young man in midst of civilized people.[76]

Notions of integration never materialized into action. The portion of indigenous Liberians that assimilated remained minimal. The Americo-Liberian's ambivalent attitudes towards indigenous Liberians thwarted the possibility of integration between the two groups. Though Americo-Liberians attempted to inculcate Western values they rejected any real assimilation of the indigenous population. Contempt for the indigenous population extended to Africans who converted to Christianity. Intermarriage between indigenous Liberians and Americo-Liberians proved scarce and looked down upon by Americo-Liberian society. Those indigenous Liberians who sought to assimilate themselves into the new republic found there was no place for them in Liberia's oligarchical political order.

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[75] Akpan, 227.
[76] William Douglass. 5 February, 1857. Letter to Dr. James H. Minor. The Liberian Letters. University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

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Throughout Liberian history there are various Americo-Liberians who opposed the oppressive regime that the Americo-Liberian elite instituted. Not all Americo-Liberians shared the predominate sentiments against the humanity of indigenous Liberians. To Edward Wilmot Blyden the indigenous African culture had merit and the treatment towards indigenous Liberians was wrong. Assimilating indigenous Liberians and stripping them of their culture was subjugating them to enslavement. Blyden argued that Americo-Liberians had to abandon their doomed attempt to build a Christian state on a European model. If Americo-Liberians did not they would continue to be "the most infertile and the most contemptible of beings-hypocrites."[77]

Domination of the Hinterland

Regardless of their color Americo-Liberians instituted an oppressive rule similar to European colonialism elsewhere in Africa. Definitions for colonialism vary across disciplines and perspectives. For this thesis Colonialism will be defined as the political, economic and cultural subjugation of a society to an external force. The external colonizing force manipulates and transforms the dominated society according to its own needs and interests. Often colonization is thought as the subjugation of black people to white powers. Though white colonization often implicates racial dynamics or as Du Bois states "the problem of the color line," Liberia provides an exception. Liberia represents a form of colonialism based on ethnicity

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[77] Edward W. Blyden. "Progress in Liberia." *Liberia* 28 (1906): 36-59.

rather than race, black colonialism. In essence black colonialism is the domination of black

societies by other black societies. Instances of black colonialism can be found not only in Liberia

but in Ethiopia as well.

Though Americo-Liberians comprised less than ten percent of the total population they

established minority rule over an indigenous majority.[78] Over time Americo-Liberians comprised

a petite bourgeoisie that controlled the economic, educational and social structures within

Liberia. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century an aristocratic relationship

persisted between Americo-Liberians and indigenous Liberians. Americo-Liberian policies and

attitudes towards the indigenous population resembled those adopted by European governments

towards colonized Africans.

Renowned Liberian scholar, J. Gus Liebenow describes the Americo-Liberian

relationship to the indigenous Liberian population as follows:

> The superior group in the relationship monopolized the use of force, establishing the
> primary goals of all societies concerned, limited the means for attaining these goals, and
> attempted to determine the ultimate outcome of the relationship-continued domination, a
> form of integration or eventual separation of the several societies.[79]

Ironically, Americo-Liberians were inspired by the very western practices that excluded their

full participation in Western society.

Indigenous Liberians were excluded from political participation. The indigenous Liberian

population was expected to accept the sovereignty of the Liberian government over their

respective tribal governments. Citizenship remained restricted to the settlers and their

descendants. Liberia's constitution prevented the indigenous population from acquiring

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[78] Gus, xx.
[79] Ibid, XVII.

automatic citizenship with equal rights. Indigenous Liberians lacked voting rights until 1948, despite the fact that indigenous Liberians outnumbered Americo-Liberians in a one hundred to one ratio.[80] Eventually the indigenous population received the right to send representatives to the Liberian government, only as non-voting observers. In order to gain full citizenship indigenous Liberians had to demonstrate an adoption of western lifestyle for three consecutive years. An Americo-Liberian official summarized the criteria. "As soon as a native assumes what we call civilized habits, shows a tendency to cooperate with us…he becomes qualified as a land-owner under statues for citizenship."[81] Additionally, indigenous Liberians had to adopt Christianity in place of their indigenous religious beliefs.

During the early settlement years the influence that Americo-Liberians exercised remained contained to the numerous civilized settlements along the coast. Early in the twentieth century the Americo-Liberian government began to flex its power into the hinterland, affecting a larger portion of the indigenous population. This expansion occurred in reaction to British and French advancements in colonizing the African continent after the Berlin Conference of 1884. For many Americo- Liberians British control in neighboring Sierra Leone jeopardized Liberian autonomy. Under the Berlin Conference General Act of 1885, Liberia ceded a sizeable portion of its coastline to British Sierra Leone.[82] Colonizing European powers argued that Liberia had to demonstrate effective control of all of the territories it claimed.

In an offensive move against the British the Americo-Liberian government brought indigenous groups under their indirect rule. Indirect rule proved a feasible choice amidst a lack

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[80] Akpan, 227.

[81] E.D.M. "The Liberian Mission-Its Objects, Hopes and Possibilities." *Liberia* 19 (1901): 68.

[82] Ikechi Mgbeoji. Collective Insecurity: The Liberian Crisis, Unilateralism, and Global Order (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003): 7.

of funds and competent administrative personnel. The "hinterland was acquired by treaty."[83] Through persuasion and force African chiefs signed treaties of amity and commerce with the Liberian government. Under these treaties African chiefs placed their territories under Liberia's jurisdiction. [84]

In a continuation of previous efforts, Americo-Liberians sought to establish more "civilized" settlements. Yet again settlers believed they could evangelize more indigenous Liberians with a more direct sphere of influence. Additionally, expansion into the interior hinterland served more practical and economic purposes.[85] From a colonial economic standpoint expansion into the hinterland provided access to new markets and resources. The newly established settlements potentially fostered an increase in trade between Americo-Liberians and indigenous Liberians. Prior to the twentieth century, settlements already enabled Americo-Liberians to encroach on the economy of indigenous populations and squash any competition that the indigenous population posed to Americo-Liberian economic interests. The Americo-Liberian elite established its monopolistic control over coastal trade in 1849 with an act regulating navigation, commerce and revenue.[86] This port of entry policy required all foreign traders to conduct their business at only six designated ports of entry. The six approved ports were all locations of settler enclaves. Under this ports of entry policy foreigners had to accept local Americo-Liberian merchants as intermediaries for the sale of their cargoes.

In Americo-Liberian society trade proved appealing because it required little physical exertion and provided the fastest means to earn a profit. Trading required little skills, resources

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[83] E.D.M. "The Liberian Mission-Its Objects, Hopes and Possibilities." *Liberia* 19 (1901): 68.
[84] Akpan, 220.
[85] Ibid, 220.
[86] Shick, 103.

and prior experience from a largely unskilled Americo-Liberian population. Americo-Liberians devoted more time to trade than agriculture.[87] Agricultural labor remained linked in connotation to their collective past experience as enslaved field hands. The commonality of this aversion to labor is evident in the following complaint of an early settler:

> I must say that I am afraid that our Country never will improve as is until the people in the United States keep their slaves that they have raised as dumb…and Send those here who will be a help to improve the country…I think she has sent out the most stupid set of people…when they come here they feel so free that they walk about from morning till evening without doing one stroke of work.[88]

Amongst Americo-Liberians freedom remained linked to the control of one's labor.

Intra-Racial Enslavement in Liberia

Freedom was defined based upon yeoman American values, the opportunity to own land. Definitions of freedom included avoiding field labor that they experienced in the United States. Disdain for field labor extended to all social strata. Among educated Americo-Liberians the only acceptable association with agriculture was that of an absentee plantation landlord.[89] In many aspects becoming civilized meant imitating the lifestyle of American Southern gentry.

The Americo-Liberian government justified their indirect rule based on a need for more farming land. These needs mostly concerned the Americo-Liberian elite. Throughout the indirect rule indigenous Liberians contributed to the enrichment of certain Americo-Liberians in the form

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[87] Clegg, 83.
[88] Samson Ceasar. 2 June, 1834. Letter to Henry F. Westfall. The Liberian Letters. University of Virginia, Charlottesville.
[89] Gus, 12.

of hut taxes and forced labor.[90] Essentially, the expansion of Americo-Liberian rule signified

Africans subordinating other Africans for the purpose of political, economic and religious

exploitation. "In Liberia, indirect rule proved largely a scourge to the indigenous Liberian

population."[91] Americo-Liberian officials constantly harassed and oppressed the indigenous

Liberian population, employing many of the same methods utilized by the British in neighboring

colonies. Inadequately trained and insufficiently paid, district commissioners converted their

districts into centers of extortion and oppression. District commissioners frequently came from

the lower classes of Americo-Liberian society.[92] Far removed from the social rewards of

Monrovia, district commissioners utilized oppression as a means to exert their superior identity

over the supposedly inferior indigenous population.

In emulating the lifestyle of American Southern gentry, Americo-Liberians instituted a

system of forced labor that resembled enslavement. The once oppressed slave became the new

oppressors in Liberia. Frequently, elite Americo-Liberians utilized indigenous Liberians as

unpaid field hands within their private plantations. An early Americo-Liberian settler describes

the situation as "the natives are numerous in this place and they do the most of the work for the

people in this place."[93]

The indigenous Liberian population was expected to provide labor for public projects. In

1921 the Americo-Liberian government embarked on a road-building program in the hinterland

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[90] Akpan 230.
[91] Ibid, 229.
[92] Gus, 105.
[93] Sampson Ceasar. 7 February 1834. Letter to David S. Haselden. The Liberian Letters. University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

that required indigenous Liberian populations to contribute nine months of compulsory and

unpaid labor each year.[94] Laborers worked under ruthless and inhumane conditions.

The Arrival of Firestone and the League of Nations

The demand for indigenous labor increased in 1926 when the Americo-Liberian

government signed a concessions agreement with the American Rubber Company, Firestone. In

Liberia the Firestone Rubber Company found a tropical climate ideal for growing rubber and an

abundant indigenous labor force. Most of all, Firestone found a government that was eager to

offer concessions in exchange for the United States' protection against encroaching colonial

powers. Through the agreement Liberia became the de facto protectorate of the United States.

Firestone obtained unlimited rights over one million acres for a period of ninety-nine

years.[95] This allotted quantity of land constitutes four per cent of Liberia's territory and

approximately ten percent of the arable land. The Firestone Company agreed to pay an annual

rent of six cents an acre on land that was under development. As part of the agreement the

Liberian government accepted a five million dollar loan from the Firestone Company. Liberia's

annual budget and finances were placed under the supervision of an American financial advisor

appointed by the United States government.

These transactions brought thousand of dollars to the Americo-Liberian government. The

presence of Firestone had little positive economic impact on the indigenous population that

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[94] Akpan, 231.
[95] I. K. Sundiata. Brothers and Strangers: Black Zion, Black Slavery, 1914-1940. (Durham,
  North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003), 99.

resided in the Hinterland where the rubber plantations were planned. Monetary economies existed only within coastal areas where the Americo-Liberian elites lived. By 1930, Firestone employed 10,000 laborers on its plantations, but more than 8,500 of them were forced laborers.[96] Under contract stipulations, the Americo-Liberian government promised to supply fifty thousand laborers for Firestone's operations in Liberia. Furthermore, during the King administration Liberian soldiers known as the Liberian Frontier Force, committed midnight raids on indigenous villages seeking laborers for various plantations on the Spanish island of Fernando Po.[97]

The conditions of forced labor and inhumane treatment that indigenous Liberians experienced gained international attention by 1928. The League of Nations Permanent Court of International Justice and the International Labor Office launched an investigation into the issue of slavery and forced labor in Liberia.[98] A fact-finding Commission was appointed and allotted four months to access the working conditions in Liberia. Commission members consisted of a black American sociologist, Dr. Charles S. Johnson, British dentist, Dr. Cuthbert Christy and Liberia's ex-president, Arthur Barclay.

In 1930 investigations culminated with the "Christy Report." Committee members concluded that no form of organized slavery existed. The Christy Report delved into Americo-Liberian and indigenous Liberian relations, noting that government officials abused their positions in order to recruit labor with the collaboration of Liberian Frontier Forces. The compulsory recruitment of labor in many parts of the hinterland served for export, private use or public works. The League of Nations recommended that Liberia be placed under a capable and

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[96] Sundiata, 99.
[97] Gus, 67.
[98] Ballah, 8.

warmhearted white administration. Liberia was pressed to reorganize its government, abolish the export of labor to Fernando Po, and extend opportunities to the indigenous Liberian population. Admittedly, the League's findings did not significantly improve working conditions of the status of indigenous Liberians. The system of forced recruitment continued until the early 1960s.

The presence of Firestone in Liberia reflects the expansion of American imperialism during the twentieth century. The United States is a case of cultural, economic and political hegemonic-imperialism without a major colonial empire. The presence of American capital shaped the United States' attitudes and actions toward Liberia. It was never the United States' intention to openly absorb Liberia. Rather, American policy sought to promote the "dominance of its capital behind the façade of an independent state managed by the national elite."[99] The United States was content with permitting Firestone's private enterprise to construct its own imperium while circumscribing the independent of the Liberian Republic.

I suggest that American imperialism in Liberia marked the first case of neocolonialism on the African continent. Postcolonial theorists argue that neocolonialism is the phenomenon in which after WWII the colonial powers switched over to the American model, giving colonies independence while maintaining economic influence or control over former colonies.[100] Until this day Liberians do not fully benefit from its natural resource, rubber production.

Often the Spanish American War (1898-1901) is regarded the turning point in which the United States emerged as a great imperialistic power. Ironically this conflict was justified by the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, named after James Monroe its enunciator, the same president who approved the expatriation of blacks from the United States to Liberia. With the Monroe Doctrine

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[99] Sundiata, 111.
[100] Robert J.C. Young. *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 42.

on their side the United States engaged in the Spanish American War professing to thwart Spanish colonization in the Americas. Through the war the United States acquired an economic empire in Asia (Philippines), the Caribbean and Latin America (Cuba).

It can be argued that the defining exploitative features of American imperialism can be found within the United States' borders since its very genesis. The Indian removal policies and the institution of slavery represent forms of internal colonialism. Americo-Liberians were thus subject to White American hegemony and its effects twice. It would be remiss not to note that DuBois wrote The Souls of Black Folk and developed the social theory of double consciousness in 1903, at a time when the United States' hegemonic reach was extending throughout the world.

Figure 2 Photograph of indigenous laborers on one of the Firestone plantations, Liberia, Africa.
Source: University of Southern California Libraries Special Collections.

Figure 3 Photograph of Liberian laborers at the Firestone Plantation Company, in Harbel, Liberia.
Source: Africawithin.com

DuBois and Liberia

It would be remiss not to include a brief discussion of W.E.B. Du Bois' direct involvement with the Americo-Liberian elite and the presence of Firestone in Liberia. In 1923 Du Bois arrived to Liberia on what would be his first encounter with the African continent. Du Bois states "When shall I forget the night I first set foot on African soil…I, the sixth generation in descent from my stolen forefathers." During this visit Du Bois attended the inauguration of President Charles D.B. King as a special representative for the Coolidge administration.

Du Bois briefly immersed into the society of Americo-Liberian elites and was greatly impressed.[101] He admired the lifestyle of southern gentry that many Americo-Liberians elites held, commenting on a "mansion of five generations with a compound of endless native servants." Apparently, Du Bois did not fully understand the nature of relations between Americo-Liberians and the indigenous population. Du Bois returns to the United States asserting that Liberia "extended her democracy to include native on the same terms as Liberians."[102] As previously mentioned the situation for indigenous Liberians was quite the opposite.

Du Bois accurately described Liberia's underdevelopment. He recommended American economic and diplomatic support for Liberia's modernization. He proposed a commission of American economists and anthropologists to study the agricultural and industrial possibilities of Liberia. This commission would investigate possible profits while being mindful of the Liberian state's welfare. For him a benevolent form of capitalism would fuel Liberia's modernization. Du Bois was aware of Firestone's interest in creating rubber in Liberia. In a letter to Firestone Du

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[101] Frank Chalk. "Du Bois and Garvey Confront Liberia: Two Incidents of the Coolidge Years," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 1, no. 2 (November 1967), 137.
[102] Chalk, 138.

Bois supported the introduction of foreign capital form the Firestone Company in Liberia. Harvey Firestone never acknowledged Du Bois' letter. In 1933, Du Bois remembered:

> On my return to the United States I wrote to him (Firestone). I know what modern capital does to poor and colored peoples. I know what European imperialism has done to Asia and Africa; but, nevertheless, I had not then lost faith in the capitalist system, and I believed that it was possible for a great corporation, headed by a man of vision, to go into a country with something more than the mere ideal of profit.[103]

To some extent Du Bois reflected the predilections of the black elite class he belonged to in the United States. He mistook "elegance in Liberia for culture and the reality of a democratic society."[104] For Du Bois the Americo-Liberian elite constituted the talented tenth, the leadership class that would improve the condition of the black race. Amerio-Liberians were the "best of this race that may guide the mass away from the contamination and death of the worst."[105]

After the League of Nation's investigation Du Bois did not direct the main force of criticism at Liberia. Instead he lashed out against those who singled out Liberia while ignoring forced labor in European colonies.[106] It can be argued that prior to his radicalization later in life; Du Bois was affected by the same double consciousness that affected the Americo-Liberian elites. The political scientist Dr. Cedric Robinson argues that Du Bois's encounters with Americo-Liberians in the 1920s exposed weaknesses in his historical and social consciousness.[107]

Later in life Du Bois criticized the talented tenth he once praised. According to Du Bois the talented tenth sought to promote its own economic interest rather than the overall wellbeing

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[103] W.E.B. Du Bois. "Liberia, the League and the United States," Foreign Affairs 11, no. 4 (1933): 684.
[104] Chalk, 141.
[105] W.E.B. Du Bois, " The Talented Tenth," from *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative Negroes of To-day* (New York, 1903).
[106] Chalk, 138.
[107] Robinson, 48.

of the black community. Like the Americo-Liberian elite, the talented tenth "came to regard himself and his whims as necessarily the end and only end of civilization and culture."[108] In his reexamination of the talented Du Bois advocated that leadership could arise from many levels. The next generation of black leadership's would serve and bring happiness to black people everywhere.

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[108] W.E.B. Du Bois. "The Talented Tenth: Memorial Address." In *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader*, (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1995): 349.

CONCLUSION: THE END OF AN ERA

Admittedly, relations between Americo-Liberians and indigenous Liberians did improve under the presidency of William V.S. Tubman. During his presidency the enactment of a 1963 law gave municipal status to the Liberian hinterland.[109] He also promoted national integration by extending educational opportunities to those in the hinterlands. Tubman also extended universal adult suffrage to the indigenous Liberians. Suffrage still included a property qualification.[110] Yet, these changes seemed to have come too late and too little.

Despite Tubman's efforts socioeconomic and political disparity persisted between Americo-Liberians and indigenous Liberians. From the beginning, conceived differences between the "civilized" freed enslaved and the "backward" indigenous population damaged economic and socio-political relations between the two groups.[111] It was this tension that eventually caused the fall from power of the ruling Americo-Liberian class.

On April 12, 1980 a coup d'état resulted in the death of President Tolbert. Master Sergeant Samuel D. Doe took power on the premise that Tolbert's government was corrupt and violated human rights. Doe's government, the People's Redemption Council, instituted the mass execution of Americo-Liberians and opponents.[112] From 1980-1990 Samuel D. Doe fulfilled an executive role, as Liberia's first indigenous head of state. To the people's disappointment Doe's regime was marred by the continuation of an absolute presidency and the rampant corruption that characterized the previous Americo-Liberian regime. Amidst the general disillusionment with Doe's government, Charles Taylor spearheaded a sustained opposition called the National

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[109] Olukoju, 13.
[110] Olukoju, 13.
[111] Ballah, 1.
[112] Olukoju, 15.

Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). Charles Taylor is of Americo-Liberian descent. After Taylor's

armed invasion of Nimba county Liberia entered a period of civil war. The civil war lasted from

December 1989 to July 1997 when the Taylor government was inaugurated.[113]

Emphasizing cultural differences as an explanation for relationships of Americo-Liberian

superiority and indigenous Liberian superiority proved to be self-defeating. Instead of emerging

as a powerful representation of Black self –determination Liberia emerged as a model of Black

instability. The Liberian Civil War is testament to how this led to Black women and men being

pitted against each other, internalizing anti-black attitudes. Double Consciousness captures the

dependence of racial uplift ideology on dominant ideologies of whiteness and negative

constructions of blackness. Americo-Liberians replicated even as they contested the racial

oppression that characterized White supremacy in the United States. The investment of the

oppressed in the very ideologies that coerce them leads to the continuation of repressive

structures.

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[113] Olukoju, 17.

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